

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6959

INFO AMCONSUL HONG KONG

USLO PEKING

AMEMBASSY TOKYO

CINCPAC HONOLULU HI

C O N F I D E N T I A L TAIPEI 02037

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SHUM, PINT, TW

SUBJ: PRESBYTERIAN/GROC RELATIONS

REF: TAIPEI 1956 (NOTAL)

1. IN THE WAKE OF THE JUST-CONCLUDED GENERAL ASSEMBLY MEETING OF THE TAIWAN PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH (REFTEL), CHURCH AND STATE ARE MAINTAINING AN UNEASY STAND-OFF. THE CHURCH IS OCCUPIED WITH MEETINGS AND WE HAVE BEEN TOLD IT WILL BE SEVERAL DAYS BEFORE WE CAN HAVE DIRECT CONTACT WITH ANY PRINCIPAL PARTICIPANTS. IN THE MEAN-TIME, EMBASSY OFFICER HAS INTERVIEWED A HIGH-RANKING AND KNOWLEDGEABLE TAIWANESE KMT MEMBER IN THE GROC, AND A PROMINENT INDEPENDENT POLITICIAN WITH CLOSE LINKS TO THE CHURCH.

2. BOTH MEN AGREE THAT THE CHURCH'S POWER HAS BEEN SIGNIFICANTLY ENHANCED BY THE REELECTION OF SECRETARY GENERAL KAO AND THE RECONFIRMATION OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS DECLARATION BY IMPRESSIVE MAJORITIES GIVEN THE LATENT SYMPATHY WITH THESE POSITIONS AMONG THE TAIWANESE POPULATION IN
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GENERAL. THE GROC WILL THEREFORE FIND IT MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO STIFLE THE CHURCH'S EXPRESSION OF UNORTHODOX POLITICAL VIEWS, PARTICULARLY AS THE ISSUE OF INDEPENDENCE AS ADVANCED BY THE CHURCH CONTINUES TO RECEIVE MEDIA COVERAGE, HOWEVER CRITICAL. THE EXTERNAL FACTORS OF PRIVATE AMERICAN SUPPORT FOR THE CHURCH (SYMBOLIZED BY SEVERAL US PRESBYTERIAN REPRESENTATIVES AT THE GENERAL

ASSEMBLY) AND THE ADMINISTRATION'S "HUMAN RIGHTS POLICY" ARE ALSO SEEN BY BOTH MEN (BUT PARTICULARLY THE OFFICIAL) AS INSURING THAT THE GROG WILL CONTINUE TO TREAT THE MATTER WITH UTMOST CAUTION.

3. QUESTIONS OF HOW FAR THE PRESBYTERIANS WANT TO GO AND HOW FAR THEY HAVE TO GO BEFORE THE GROG FINDS THEM INTOLERABLE REMAIN TO BE ANSWERED. THE INDEPENDENT POLITICIAN TOLD AN EMBASSY OFFICER THAT THE CHURCH LEADERSHIP WAS FEELING HEADY, BUT THAT HE HAD COUNSELED CAREFUL CONSIDERATION OF THE NEXT STEP, AND HE DOUBTED THERE WOULD BE ANY NEW CHURCH INITIATIVES FOR ANOTHER MONTH OR SO. THE OFFICIAL SAID THAT THERE WAS NO DOUBT A LIMIT BEYOND WHICH THE CHURCH COULD NOT GO WITHOUT CAUSING A GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN, BUT THAT THIS LIMIT WAS MOVABLE. SUCH A SUBTLE LINE IS EASY TO TRANSGRESS, EVEN UNINTENTIONALLY, AND BOTH MEN ARE AWARE OF THE DANGERS INHERENT IN THIS SITUATION. THE INDEPENDENT POLITICIAN PARTICULARLY NOTED THE CHURCH'S RELATIVE LACK OF EXPERIENCE IN DEALING WITH THE GOVERNMENT, AND THAT IT WOULD NEED GOOD ADVICE (WHICH HE CLAIMS IT IS SOLICITING FROM HIM) IN ORDER TO AVOID UNINTENTIONAL PROVOCATION OF THE GROG BEYOND ITS LIMITS OF ENDURANCE.

4. COMMENT: WE BELIEVE THAT THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH MAY BE IN AN EVEN STRONGER POSITION THAN IT REALIZES. ITS
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SUGGESTION (IN THE DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS) THAT THE GROG "TAKE EFFECTIVE MEASURES WHEREBY TAIWAN MAY BECOME A NEW AND INDEPENDENT COUNTRY" HAS PROVOKED NOTHING OVERT BEYOND A BLAND WARNING NOT TO ENGAGE IN POLITICS, AND THIS SEEMS TO INDICATE THAT THE PRESBYTERIANS MAY HAVE ROOM FOR ADDITIONAL ACTIVITY WHICH WOULD FALL SHORT OF PROVOKING A GOVERNMENT CRACKDOWN. GIVEN OUR IMPRESSION OF GENERAL SECRETARY KAO'S CALM AND DELIBERATE NATURE, AND AS LONG AS IT ACCEPTS THE WISE COUNSEL NOTED ABOVE, WE DO NOT BELIEVE THE CHURCH WILL MAKE ANY MOVE TO TEST THE LIMITS OF THE GROG'S TOLERANCE IN THE NEAR FUTURE. RATHER, WE EXPECT THE CHURCH, WHICH IS PROBABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT OF THE FEW ORGANIZATIONS ON TAIWAN OUTSIDE OF THE ESTABLISHMENT'S CONTROL, TO BECOME INCREASINGLY INVOLVED IN NON-KMT POLITICAL LIFE, PARTICULARLY AS THE DECEMBER ELECTIONS DRAW NEARER. UNGER

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